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Christ and Karma: Mission in the Land of Theravada Buddhism

Introduction

Several years ago while serving as Director of the Thailand Adventist Seminary and as the senior pastor of the Muak Lek Seventh-day Adventist Church, I experienced one of my most meaningful pastoral experiences primarily because of Jon Dybdahl's contextual contribution, vision, and support of the local church work. Not only was he fluent in the Thai language, he was also in tune with the local culture. Many former students and colleagues still remember our unique church experience during this period. Members removed their shoes as they entered the place of worship. Straw mats were spread out across the entire floor, and we sat on them. There were neither chairs nor pews. We dressed simply and most women wore sarongs to church. The musical selections were typically Thai, and many were composed by local people. Sermons were carefully designed, using cultural contexts and local terms.

Some missionaries and locals who had been raised in the Adventist Church their entire lives were not fully comfortable with this practical contextualization. It made me realize the need to step away from our familiar comfort zones (religious as well as cultural) and learn to enter a totally different way of seeing and being in order to communicate more effectively.

Once while teaching world religions to a group of approximately 40 Buddhist students, I asked them to respond to my questions without reflection. "Do you believe in Ganesha (the elephant god in Hinduism)?" They shook their heads. "Do you believe in the goddess Kali (another Hindu god with six arms)? They said they did not. "Do you believe that Jesus walked on the water?" They responded, "No." "Do you believe that on the day Buddha was born he walked eight steps?" Without any hesitation they responded in the affirmative. Upon further reflection, they

came to the realization that these are all stories of miracles, and the only difference was their familiarity with the story of Buddha. This experience makes me think of the importance of being aware of our assumptions and the need to move beyond our sense of comfort.

Through the years I have had many conversations with Jon Dybdahl and have learned the significance of the place of worldview in missiology. It is interesting how we use words to communicate but often do not realize that words have to be located. A mis-located word misrepresents the message. Wittgenstein (1953) taught us well when he pointed out that in any language game, without knowing the game, the words have no meaning.

As a Thai who grew up in a Buddhist country, I was often fascinated by well-intentioned missionaries who came in to proclaim the gospel by promising eternal life through Jesus Christ, not realizing that eternal life, within the Buddhist worldview, is not something to be desired. In fact, to want eternal life is to be stuck within the cycle of birth and rebirth resulting from sinful desire. Another good example is the word "love" when employed within a different worldview. When Christians talk about the love of God, we imply strong attachment to a person: love that will ultimately bring people to eternal life. But in Buddhism, compassion is the promotion of detachment, an attempt to help one realize that the ultimate goal is to find freedom by being unattached to people and the things of this world.

Being Christian, in a cross-cultural setting, is not about acquiring and generously utilizing Christian vocabulary such as Jesus Christ, God, prophets, the gospel, Sabbath, baptism, and numerous other words. The meaning of a word is determined by its context. Placing a name, such as Jesus Christ, within the framework of Buddhist cosmology does not fully and symbolically convey the true meaning of Christ. It is important when ministering within an inter-religious context that worldviews be addressed.

On a number of occasions while counseling couples I have seen the importance of the hermeneutical function of assumption. What we assume colors everything we see and determines the ways in which we respond to situations or comments. I remember one couple in particular who fought from the beginning right to the very end of the session. Before leaving the session, I asked if they would give each other a hug. They embraced one another. By the next session, all conversation was constructive and nurturing. The thing that changed was the realization for both that they were loved. When this basic assumption changed, it turned their conversation in a positive direction.

Assumptions play a significant role in communication. The meaning of

the word is determined to a large extent by its very context (Wittgenstein 1953). The word “Christ” can take on a different meaning when presented in a different context. And so a missionary may think that he or she is preaching the gospel when in fact the meaning may be far from what the gospel really means within a Judeo-Christian worldview. If we do not take assumptions into consideration, the message we intend to communicate may be lost in translation, metaphorically speaking. Carl Jung, by showing the similarity between primitive and civilized societies, helps us understand the importance of assumptions.

As a matter of fact, primitive man is no more logical or illogical than we are. His presuppositions are not the same as ours, and that is what distinguishes him from us. His thinking and his conduct are based on assumptions other than our own. To all that is in any way out of the ordinary and that therefore disturbs, frightens or astonishes him, he ascribes what we should call a supernatural origin. For him, of course, these things are not supernatural; on the contrary, they belong to his world of experience. (Jung 1933:127)

So what are the philosophical and metaphysical assumptions we need to understand in order to better communicate with Buddhists?

Theravada Buddhism¹

What philosophical and metaphysical assumptions do Buddhists embrace that Christians should be aware of in order to communicate more effectively? In this section I will outline the basic theological understanding of Theravada Buddhism, drawing mostly from the writings of George Grimm, a Buddhist scholar.

Buddhism emerged from the struggle with the issue of human suffering and ways out of this suffering. Upon seeing old, sick, and dying people, Gotama pledged to find a way out of this human predicament. Hence, the core of Buddhism teaches that to be is to suffer (Matthews 1999:136). It is the fundamental reality of human beings; therefore, all of life should be the path toward the cessation of suffering. If to be is to suffer, suffering ceases in the attempt to not be. In the Buddhist worldview, time is not linear but cyclical. In this cyclical time there exists four basic elements: earth, water, fire, and air (Grimm 1958:207). Together with these elements there also exists an impersonal law—the law of *karma* or the law of causality (194, 195). Under certain conditions, through the law of *karma*, various elements come together and form different objects such as plants, animals, and human beings—all depending upon its cause. Everything that exists in this world is a combination of two or more of these basic elements. These the Buddha calls *sankharas*, which literally means “to make” or “to

put together" (207). How things come together is explained through the Buddhist understanding of the law of *karma*: "this law of *karma* is nothing more than the law of causality, not only in its formal meaning, as the law of cause and effect, but also in its material significance, according to which a certain quite definite effect always follows upon a certain definite cause" (195).

Since everything is a "production," there will always remain the possibility of dissolution, or returning to the basic elements. "All productions are transitory, all productions cause Suffering" (208). The Buddha says, "Transient, monks, are the productions (*sankharas*), unsteady are the productions, troublesome are the productions" (Grimm 1958:208). The whole world is nothing but a process of production and dissolution in accordance with the law of causality. The world is made up of the basic elements and one day it returns to its basic elements—earth, water, wind, and fire.

Corporeality and Mentality (Personality)

The concept of corporeality and mentality (personality) applies to human beings as well. Under certain conditions, in accord with the law of causality, the four basic elements come together and form a person. Hence a person is but a "putting together" of earth, water, wind, and fire. Human beings, therefore, are basically matter.

If a person is merely matter, what then leads to the formation of personality that enables him or her to have well-organized contact with the external world? The answer to this question is rather complicated. First, we need to have an understanding of the law of causality. This law does not control the physical world alone; its realm also includes the moral aspect. The ability to see causality within morality only comes when we look within ourselves and discover that "all becoming proceeds from grasping" (Grimm 1958:175), or the will to live. This will to live leads to the "putting together" of basic elements in order for contact to take place. The Buddha states, "If, Ananda, you were asked: 'Is contact due to a particular cause?' you should say: 'It is.' And to the question: 'From what cause is contact?' you should say 'Nama-rupa (corporeality and mentality) is the cause of contact'" (81).

The will for contact or *tanha* (desire) (Matthews 1999:137), leads to the formation of a person. A person, according to the Buddha, is but an aggregate of corporeality and mentality (*nama-rupa*). In fact, he or she is merely a name form given to a grouping of the five aggregates that are constantly changing—always becoming and never "being." These five aggregates, or *khandhas*, are corporeality, sensation, perception, mental formation, and consciousness.²

Reality and the True Self

Personality (corporeality and mentality) is the apparatus that makes contact between the self and the external world possible. At the same time, it is precisely through these that suffering also arises, since the world and the personality are nothing but productions that inevitably have to face dissolution—all is transient, all is arising and passing away. “Because all existence is will, everything that is in harmony with this will is happiness, and everything hindering it is suffering” (Grimm 1958:39). We “will” for contact, and through this ‘will’ personality is developed, whereby contact is made possible. But because both the world and personality are impermanent, it becomes a hindrance and hence we suffer (39).

Is the world of evolution and dissolution the only reality? Is personality my true self? If so, there would be no way out of the problem of suffering. Suffering and human beings would coexist for eternity. But to the Buddha there is a way out from suffering, because he was awakened to another reality beyond the world of evolution and dissolution, beyond impermanent personality. He was awakened to the supreme reality: “We really all have a lasting divination or presentiment that [is] also under this reality in which we live and are there lies hidden a second and different reality. It is the thing-in-itself” (25, 26).

What is the nature of this reality the Buddha discovered? “There is,” says Buddha, “a not-born, a not-become, a not-created, a not-formed” (Grimm 1958:380). This concept of reality is further explained in *Udana* 1 VIII, 1:

There is a yonder realm where neither earth is nor water, neither fire nor air, neither the boundless realm of space nor the boundless realm of consciousness, neither this world nor another, neither moon nor sun. This is called neither coming nor going nor standing, neither origination nor annihilation. Without support, without beginning, without foundation is this. This same is the end of suffering. (380)

If there is another reality behind this phenomenal world that cannot be categorized under transitoriness, then there is hope for deliverance from suffering, since all suffering has its root in transitoriness. How does one come to understand this possibility?

“I am: that is the most certain axiom there is” (Grimm 1958:112). This is so because every perception is effected through me and therefore presupposes me as the perceiving subject. Yet the predicate “am” may not be applicable to my essence. Does this “am” refer to my corporeal form together with my consciousness, sensation, and perception, or does it refer to another reality that transcends the empirical, transitory world? What is the true essence of a person?

What I perceive originating and perishing cannot be myself. What I perceive originating and perishing must, logically speaking, be something different from me. For if I am identical with the object, with its disappearance I also should have ceased to exist—but there I am; I am still there after the thing disappeared. “It is precisely its disappearance that causes me astonishment, surprise and—pain” (115). I am because I suffer. I suffer because I perceive and experience transitoriness. To experience suffering presupposes that “I” must exist since experience cannot stand alone. At the same time, to experience transitoriness means that I am not participating in this incessant change. To experience transitoriness I and that which is transitory cannot be one and the same or else no such experience can arise. Thus I cannot be identical with the cause of my pain. Hence the cause of my pain does not belong to my essence. Further, since pain is conditional, it is not part of my essence (115).

The Buddha said, “*Sabbe dhamma anatta*: all things are not the I” (cited by Grimm 1958:138). Through the indirect approach to the question of humans’ true essence, the Buddha discovers “what am I not?” The world, my personality, and my will do not belong to my true essence. They have nothing to do with my true “me.” But if we are not the world and neither personality nor will, there is almost nothing left, and one is immediately confronted with the question: What am I then? What can my essence be if it has nothing to do with the empirical world, nor my corporeal organism, nor my consciousness, nor my sensation, nor my perception, nor my cognition, nor my will? What am I?

Since we have been stripped of all these and “still we are,” what shall I then be? We want to be something and not nothing. But the opposite of nothing is everything. What is this everything? “The eye and forms, the ear and sounds, the nose and odors, the tongue and flavors, the body and objects of touch, thinking and ideas, this, ye monks, is called Everything” (cited by Grimm 1958:133). But from the above argument Grimm concludes that this “Everything” cannot be your essence. “But behind all this, that is, behind Everything, there is only Nothing. Consequently you are not Something, but you are indeed—Nothing” (133). This is called *anatta* or the doctrine of no-self as the essential core of Buddhism (Ellwood and McGraw 1999:132, 133).

Christ and Karma: The Place of Worldview

Therefore, it is important to understand that at the core of Buddhism is the problem of suffering. To be is to suffer (*dukkha*). The way out of suffering is to realize that it is desire (*tanha*) that leads to being. And this desire is perpetuated by ignorance (*avidya*) when we do not understand that the true essence of us is *anatta* (no-self). This thing called “I” is nothing but a

“putting-together” that arises because of the desire to be. But there really is no “I.” Hence, to grasp this understanding of the doctrine of “no-self” is the solution to the problem of suffering.

In a Judeo-Christian worldview, we see suffering as the result of sin and acknowledge Christ as the only source of salvation. It is through the sacrifice of Christ that we are forgiven, and the way out of suffering is through acceptance of Jesus Christ. Often missionaries come to Thailand with a passion to bring the message of hope and forgiveness, wanting to see many converts receive Christ in their lives and obtain hope for salvation.

I once mentioned the term “forgiveness” to a missionary who had studied Buddhism thoroughly, and his immediate response was, “There is nothing to talk about. There is no forgiveness in Buddhism.” There is a Thai expression, “*Tam dee dai dee. Tam chua dai chua*,” which can be translated, “You reap what you sow.” This is the law of *karma*. It is also interesting to note that there is no word for forgiveness in the Thai language. When I have wronged someone, I will say, “Give ‘me’ punishment.” And the person may respond, “Your punishment has been lifted.” But there is a much deeper meaning to punishment within Buddhist metaphysics. To be, in essence, is to be punished under the law of *karma*. It is the punishment of the will or desire to be, to live, or to have. The punishment already takes place in the fact that one exists and in this existence there is inevitable suffering. So in a sense suffering is the result of punishment. And within this cosmology, the only way out is to not-be.

So for Christ to forgive in order that one will continue to be, to exist (and not just to continue existence but to go on forever) runs contradictory to the very essence of Buddhism itself. Promoting eternal life through Jesus Christ, in Buddhist cosmology, is like suggesting that Christianity encourages attachment and desire, which in Buddhism is considered sinful. On occasion I have teased some of my missionary friends by saying that perhaps if one wants to live for eternity, one should convert to Buddhism and keep sinning. This way, one will live forever through the cycle of life unended. And if a Buddhist wants to achieve *nirvana*, he or she should become a Christian and keep sinning. This way, one will die and never be reborn again. This is ironic unless we understand the worldviews and cosmologies that dictate how certain words are being used.

The challenge in communicating Christ is to ask how someone can best understand the gospel in relation to the problem of suffering within the worldview that holds firmly to the concept of *karma* formation. What does the gospel have to say about suffering in relation to attachment and the will to live? Heaven is not a simple solution to the problem of human suffering, and perhaps the gospel has a much more profound answer to the

problem of human suffering than paradise. The challenge in presenting Christ to Buddhists is to explore the possibility of the coexistence of being and suffering through a sense of meaning. What is it about the gospel that makes it possible “to be” even in the midst of suffering?³

What often sustains a person through suffering may not be hope for the total elimination of suffering. Working for a number of years with people who struggle with pain at both the emotional and physical levels, I have come to realize that it is not just the presence of suffering that affects one’s sense of meaning. Suffering in itself is not the fundamental basis of humanity’s struggle. Struggles are manageable when there is meaning in our suffering. It is rather the lack of meaning that makes suffering unbearable. For this reason we might hear people with terminal illness say, “There must be a reason why I have cancer.”

While meaning may be conceptualized cognitively, often a deep sense of meaning does not emerge from a well thought-out theory about life, but rather from a deep existential perspective. It is not strictly because of intellectual knowledge that there is meaning in my struggles with life. Rather, it is realizing at the existential level that meaning does exist. And this deep sense of meaning often emerges from knowing that one is loved. Love offers a deep sense of existential meaning that transcends intellectual conceptualization. Love gives meaning when our theories are falling apart and our theology is in chaos; we remain sustained because we know that love exists, because we experience love, and because through this love we come in touch with the sweetness of our very existence. Through love emerges the polarity of life that entices us toward living, the polarity of sadness and joy, life and death, tears and laughter, pain and comfort, disturbance and peace. Love is an invitation to a life worth living even in the midst of its complexity.

Hence, the gospel message can affect the fundamentals of Buddhist cosmology when the seed of existential love is planted. To love is to plow the land and loosen the soil for the seed to be planted. It does not just change someone’s vocabulary, literal location of worship, or external religious rituals. It changes that person’s reality. What makes Buddhism Buddhism is the path toward non-being as a way out of suffering. But if a Buddhist finally realizes the sweetness of life even in the midst of pain, his or her fundamental belief has changed. Jesus has become a force that alters the former reality through the presence of love.

Communicating Christ

As a guest lecturer in one of my classes, Charles Kraft told a story from his mission work in Nigeria. The members asked if he would preach, and he indicated that he would like to hear them preach. They were astonished.

They asked if he could teach them the Bible. He responded, “No.” They were confused, so he made a deal with them that if they would offer their interpretation of the texts, he would offer his as well. Then they asked if they could come to his house for Bible study.⁴ He said that he would rather go to their homes. They were not used to this, because in the past missionaries did not have Bible studies in members’ homes. He then drew a chart that showed that since God is relational, relationship is primary in God’s plan to communicate the gospel. “The gospel,” writes Saphir Athyal from Union Biblical Seminary in Maharashtra, India, “is actualized when it is heard and appropriated. It never is an abstract truth, but a message that takes concrete forms and continues to have a ‘dialogue’ with the believers in their daily practical situations” (1980:68).

This applies especially well within the context of Thai Buddhism. After spending a number of years in northern Thailand, Kosuke Koyama wrote: “Theology in Action” is a “neighbour-logical” concept. It means “to engage in theology together with one’s neighbours.” It is a humble attempt. It hopes to contribute to the ministry of the church. . . . We who engage in “neighbour-logical” theology acknowledge with humility our spiritual and mental limitations. The reality of one’s neighbours—all that they are and all that they do—must become a motivating force for our theological engagement (Koyama 1979:53).

In Buddhist cosmology, the path that one has to choose under the law of *karma* is between being (leading to pain and suffering) and non-being (peace and tranquility). Is it possible that through Christ another possibility is being offered, a place where being can gain a sense of meaning even in the presence of suffering, a sweetness of life even in the face of its complexity? I believe this is our calling, to interject meaning into life through compassion and love. When love is experienced, meaning emerges. With meaning, being becomes a possibility. Through our engagement of love and service in the reality of our neighbors, their worldview is changed at an existential level. This is the change that makes it possible for one to be touched by grace, because the experience of grace overrides the existential grip of one’s belief in *karma*. This is conversion at the existential level. It may not look externally orthodox but, internally, it is theologically valid. When Jon Dybdahl addressed missionaries to Thailand and other Buddhist countries, I often heard his passionate statement: “Grace makes all the difference.” I totally agree. And its impact can be very significant when communicated at the symbolic level through our active engagement in the everyday complexity of their lives, and not necessarily through our traditional use of arguments about the Sabbath, or the accuracy of the Bible to predict the future, or our generous use of Christian vocabulary.

While Professor Kraft and I dined in a Thai restaurant one evening, he

expressed his concern regarding ways the church often engages in mission work without really getting into the actual lives of the congregation, and the importance of engaging in this process in order to understand and impact worldviews. A couple of days later he mailed me his book *Communicating Jesus' Way* (1999). What really captured my attention was the chapter on "Christian Communication" where he points out that the message is far more than a verbal message. It is a "person message." He writes,

God himself is the message, and we are to respond to a person to properly attach meaning to that message. At the purely human level, we do the same thing with messages of love, care, concern, sympathy and the like—we respond not simply to words but to the person who does the deed. The ultimate Christian message then, is a person. And anything that reduces that message to mere words stimulates in the receptor meanings unworthy of the message. Our message is a message of life and only life can properly convey it. Thus only if that message is actually conveyed by life can it be properly understood. (Kraft 1999:97)

After traveling and researching the work of the Adventist Church among Buddhists in Thailand for the past 75 years, Yvonne Terry captured the core missiological approach in her own words:

Compassion is sharing in suffering, being sympathetic, tender, and responsive. It is being "nailed down." It is acting to share and to help. It is the involvement of ordinary individuals. It is the freedom to see others for who they are, and the intrinsic worth in that "who." It is choosing to actively love people through service. It is realizing the impact one person can make on another's life, and sensing the worth of that life. It is working toward the possibilities that exist for the impact just one person can make when they are supported by the strength of a Savior, whether in a good or bad situation, whether alone or collectively (1994:237, 238).

Notes

¹ Theravada Buddhism is one of the most orthodox of all Buddhist schools. Theravadins admit the human character of Buddha, who possessed human foibles; e.g., he was impatient with some of the *bhikkhus* (Buddhist monks) who made noise like fishermen in the fish market, so he dismissed them. He was subject to human weakness when, at the age of 80, he complained that his back was in pain. There is recognition of the human characteristics of Buddha. The main ethical teaching in this tradition is to "abstain from all evil, accumulate all goods and purify one's mind" by practicing *sila* (discipline that is divided into the order of ordinary man and that of monks), *samadhi* (meditation—gaining insight into the real nature of things), and *prajna* (which helps one understand the four Noble Truths and the

law of dependent origination). *Nirvana* is a state free from passion, ill-will, and delusion, and *arahat* is the person who reaches the state of dispassionateness or *nirvana* (the end of future birth, one who will no longer return to worldly life) (Ellwood and McGraw 1999:134-143).

² Through the will for contact there first develops corporeality (*rupa*), which can be divided into two basic groups: the underived group (earth, water, fire, and wind) and the derived group (sense organs such as eyes, ears, nose, and sensations, and physical sense objects such as form, sound, odor, and taste). Once the physical sense organs are formed, consciousness arises. Consciousness is something that cannot stand on its own. It is an effect of the interlocking of the activities of the senses and external form. The Buddha divides consciousness into six types (*viññānas*): visual, auditory, olfactory, mouth, body, and mental consciousness (Grimm 1958:71). After consciousness the next thing that arises is sensation, emerging from seeing, thinking, smelling, and hearing. This sensation or feeling is divided by the Buddha into five groups, namely, bodily agreeable feeling (*sukha*), bodily painful feeling (*dukkha*), mentally agreeable feeling (*somanassa*), mentally painful feeling (*domanassa*), and indifferent feeling (*upekkha*). From sensation arises perception, and perception is primarily the perception of form, sound, odor, taste, and bodily impressions (Grimm 1958:73-74).

³ For a detailed analysis of the relationship between the Buddhist concept of *anatta* (no-self) and Christian mission, see de Silva (1980:220-238).

⁴ This story is also mentioned in his book (Kraft 2005:7).

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